Development, life-modes and language in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), there are an estimated 869 languages (Dutton and Muhlhausler 1991:1) shared by an estimated population of just over 3.9 million. This makes the linguistic diversity in Papua New Guinea the greatest in the region, while its average of approximately 4,500 speakers per language is one of the smallest.

One of the many languages is Motu, a minor language of the Melanesian subgroup of languages which belong to the Malayo-Polynesian group, commonly known as the Austronesian family of languages. The language is spoken by over 23,000 people of Motuan and Motu-Koita origin, who are the native inhabitants and traditional landowners of Port Moresby and surrounding areas. Approximately 4,000 of the Motuan speakers live in Hanuabada.

Port Moresby, the national capital, with a population of 195,570 and an annual growth rate of 4.69 per cent, is made up of local and migrant people from many different cultures, mostly from within Papua New Guinea but also from overseas (7,481 non-citizens). Since British New Guinea was declared a British protectorate in 1884, and Australia assumed administrative responsibility for it in 1906, renaming it 'Papua', European contact has brought about many sociocultural changes.

Rural–urban migration and intermarriage are two examples of factors contributing to changes in language use and language choice in Port Moresby. Because of the need to communicate with speakers of other languages, people are forced to use several languages, both in isolation and in combination, thus exercising language choice in the city. The three lingua francas used in Port Moresby are English, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu. English is the official written language and is used in schools, universities, government and business. English is the language of instruction in Papua New Guinea, and is the language used in the two preschools, the two primary schools and the two high schools in and around the village of Hanuabada.

Languages at home

The results for Part 1 of the study by Mase (1995) show that, although nearly two-thirds of the respondents use only Motu at home, nearly one-third use at least one other language as well and the remaining three per cent do not use Motu at all in the home. For the majority of respondents (approximately 60 per cent), the reason for using Motu around the home is that it is a sign of their identity – 'it is our language'. Motu gives the speaker a sense of belonging to a particular group. A mother tongue is deeply rooted in the speaker's personal and cultural identification.

The respondents' views on which languages should be learned at home indicate a language-threatening situation. Although nearly all (98 per cent) of the respondents reported using Motu, only 68 per cent thought that it should be learned at home. Only 40 per cent use English at home but 73 per cent indicated it should be learned at home. If more people want to make English the 'home' language, a shift will be inevitable.

Just over half of the respondents reported that English should be learned at home because it would help at school and work (although only five per cent reported this as the reason for it actually being used in the home currently). Nine per cent of respondents said that English should be learned at home because it is a 'universal/international language'.

Languages at school

All the respondents for Part 1 of the study had attended or were attending school and 42 per cent reported that they had reached grade 10 or above. This figure is more than double the national average, which is 18 per cent of the population age group (National Statistics Office 1985). This is not surprising because Hanuabada is located in the midst of where modernisation first took place and continues to occur. An interesting point was that all the people over 50 years old had completed only grades 3–6.

Nearly all respondents (about 95 per cent) acquired English literacy and used English at school, the majority (82 per cent) reporting that this was because it is the language of instruction. As regards views about which language should be learned at school, a higher percentage (85 per cent) of respondents favour learning English, rather than Motu, at school.

People in Hanuabada believe English to be the only language for school, 'because it is the standard educational language'. It is noticeable that, whereas 40 per cent report using Motu at school, only ten per cent favour learning it at school. Of course, since most children learn to speak Motu at home, it would be strange to suggest that they would need to learn to speak it at school. But learning a language at school implies learning to write it, and this would not be learned at home.

The more favourable attitude for English than for the local language, expressed in both the home and school situations,

reveals how important English language is for people in Hanuabada. This attitude is again revealed in the respondents' responses to the questions based on the Tok Ples policy of the Papua New Guinean Department of Education. Over 70 per cent of the respondents oppose the use of Motu in preschool and grade 1.

Languages at work

Eighty-seven per cent of the respondents had one or more members of their extended family working in the formal sector earning an income. Families in Hanuabada depend on this income because their economy has changed to one that is largely based on cash.

Although 48 per cent use Motu at work, mostly in combination with other languages, for Hanuabada people English is the language of the formal sector of employment. Ninety-seven per cent use English at work; five per cent even acquired literacy in English while at work.

The language ecology of Hanuabada

Motu is not the only important language in the community of Hanuabada, but it is the one viewed as of great importance by 83 per cent of the respondents. Most of the reasons given for this indicate that the language serves the social function of expressing group identity and bonding. One-quarter of the respondents consider Motu to be vital for cultural maintenance, while 56 per cent view it as important because it is their mother tongue.

English is highly regarded (75 per cent said that it is just as important as Motu) because it is an international/universal language. Considered to be necessary for getting good jobs in the formal sector, it is also a lingua franca both within and outside the village, city and national boundaries.

Tok Pisin is considered important by 13 per cent of respondents because it is a national lingua franca and makes communication easier with non-Motuans in Port Moresby. None of the respondents indicated that Tok Pisin served the social function of expressing group identity and bonding.

Hiri Motu, the local (Papuan) lingua franca, was not specifically mentioned by any of the respondents, perhaps because they take it for granted. Indeed, it is hard to know whether, in some cases, respondents answered 'Motu' when they might have meant 'Hiri Motu'. However, Muhlhausler (1992) suggests that increased support for pidgin based on indigenous languages, such as Hiri Motu, may assist in language maintenance by keeping indigenous and non-traditional contact languages apart.

The impact of development on life-modes and language use

The second part of the study by Mase (1995) was designed specifically to investigate the 'villageness' of the respondents and of their social networks, and the relationships of these to language use.

The 'villageness' was measured using the following five indices:

1 where the respondent/contact spent his/her early life;
2 where the respondent/contact resides;
3 where the respondent/contact spends the working hours of the day (whether working or not);
4 whether the respondent/contact spends more than 50 per cent of his/her free time in the village; and
5 whether the respondent/contact attends village ceremonies (for example, bride-price and funeral feast ceremonies).

The language use of the respondents was measured by asking them which language(s) they would use with specific interlocutor types, for example parents, grandparents, co-worker, supervisor.

It is clear from this part of the study that there is a correlation between the 'villageness' of the respondents and of their social networks, and the respondents' language use. It is also clear that their 'villageness' and the 'villageness' of their social networks are related to their life-modes.

Hojrup (1983) based his account of life-modes on his Marxist analysis of the social and economic structures of Western European countries. Thus, for Hojrup (1983:47), the modes of production and consumption are the 'fundamental societal structures which split the population into fundamentally different life-modes'. The division of any population into these subgroups is a 'large-scale and ultimately economically driven process' (Milroy and Milroy 1992:18).

Of course, Hanuabadan society is very different from that found in Western Europe, and so one should not necessarily expect the same concepts and analyses to be applicable. For Hanuabada, it would seem useful to adopt the concept of 'life-modes' but not necessarily the explanation of their origin as given by Hojrup (1983). The appropriate life-modes for Hanuabadans seem in part economically determined (as in Hojrup 1983), but also in part determined by location of home.

Thus, in Hanuabada, one life-mode (H) comprises those who live in the village and do not work. Another life-mode (M) comprises those who live in the village, but work outside it. The third life-mode (L) comprises those who live (and most probably work) out of the village.

Each life-mode in Hanuabada gives rise to a particular set of social, cultural and linguistic behaviours, and also to a

particular network structure which enforces these social, cultural and linguistic norms.

Life-mode H comprises people who do not interact with interlocutors at work, because none of them are engaged in paid employment. They use Motu on its own with most interlocutors and mixed Motu/Other with the rest. All the people who fall into this life-mode type will have spent their early life in the village. All of them live and spend their free time in the village. Just over half will be over 40 years of age. Hardly any of the people in this type will have achieved a school grade higher than grade 10.

In particular, the villageness of all the people in this type will be high and nearly all will have networks with high villageness. In many respects, this life-mode is similar to Hojrup's life-mode 1 in that it exhibits a 'close-knit type of network structure and a solidarity ethic' (Milroy and Milroy 1992:20).

Life-mode M comprises people who use Motu with just over half of interlocutors, use Other with nearly one-third, and mixed Motu/Other with the remainder. All the people who fall into this life-mode type will have spent their early life in the village. They are more likely to be working, but they are also more likely to live and spend their free time in the village. Two-thirds will be under 40 years of age and just over half will have achieved a school grade higher than grade 10.

In particular, people of this life-mode will have low villageness, but some will have networks with high villageness and some will have networks with low villageness. In some respects, this is similar to Hojrup's life-mode 2. But Milroy and Milroy (1992:20) note that the variability in the extent to which workers in Hojrup's life-mode 2 have close-knit network ties and a solidarity ethic is a function of the wage level.

Life-mode L comprises respondents who use only Motu with about one-third of interlocutors, mixed Motu/Other with another third, and at least one other language (and no Motu) with the remaining third. People who fall into this life-mode type are more likely to be under 40 years of age, to live out of the village, to be working, and to have achieved a school grade higher than grade 10. Just over half will spend their free time out of the village.

The villageness of people in this type will be low, as will the villageness of their networks. Like the people of Hojrup's life-mode 3, those in life-mode L will be socially and geographically mobile and will have many loose ties.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that there is little support in Hanuabada for the PNG education policy on the introduction of Tok Ples (village language) programmes into schools. Most of the respondents favour learning English, rather than the indigenous language (Motu), at school. A similar attitude seems to exist with regard to which languages should be learned at home. Although 97 per cent of respondents reported 'using' Motu at home, only 67 per cent thought it should be 'learned' at home, and, whereas only 40 per cent 'use' English at home, 72 per cent indicated it should be 'learned' at home. The reasons given for learning and using English can all be classed as 'instrumental' and be seen to relate to social mobility and improvement in employment prospects in the formal sector.

The desire for English to be learned at home, together with use of it as the medium of instruction in school, creates a language-threatening situation. If more people want to make English the home language and very few want Motu to be learned at school, a shift will be inevitable.

The consequence of a 'shift' in some bilingual/multilingual situations is that an indigenous language is gradually replaced by an outside language. As the urban city of Port Moresby develops around Hanuabada, many Hanuabadans will become 'socially and geographically mobile as they pursue their careers, forming many loose ties, particularly of a professional kind, through which innovations and influence may be transmitted' (Milroy and Milroy 1992:21). Will these Hanuabadans, in pursuit of development and modernisation, unwittingly contribute to the death of their mother tongue in Hanuabada?

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